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## VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EMERGENCY SERVICES

# Russell County develops task force



Last month, the work of Madison County's Flood Relief committee was presented. This month examines Russell County's use of the concept of a recovery

committee, particularly with regard to mitigation efforts.

On Memorial Day weekend, the small community of Dante near the Clinch River was hit hard by flash flooding that affected about 200 people in the region. "We had four inches of rain in a two-hour period on ground that was already saturated by previous rains," said Emergency Services Coordinator Judy Cooling.

"We decided we needed to form a recovery task force to determine where we were and where we needed to go. The committee's mission was to look at mitigation efforts with regard to rivers and streams in the area."

A range of federal, state and local agencies and organizations were represented on the committee. Included were a community action group that assists low-income families with housing needs, the Tennessee Valley Authority which works on mitigation projects related to the Clinch River, the Virginia Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy, the federal Natural Resources and Conservation Service, local elected officials, a debris-removal contractor and the VDES regional hazmat officer.

Cooling discussed some of the concepts gleaned from Madison County and used by their committee:

✧ To ensure the task force works, involve state and federal agencies in the ongoing mitigation projects. "This kind of backing provides the momentum to keep the ball rolling and to make sure hazard mitigation efforts continue," said Cooling.

✧ The task force should meet regularly so that ideas and information about ongoing projects can be exchanged. Cooling pointed out the Russell County task force meets about every six weeks.

✧ Involve local government which is generally willing to participate. "Their involvement fosters a spirit of cooperation with community members," Cooling observed.

✧ Make sure your task force is composed of members from a variety of agencies and organizations. "They all have resources they can tap into that may not be directly available to local government or that local government may not be aware of," observed Cooling.

"Initially, the biggest problem we had was with funding. We knew what we

wanted to do, but we didn't have the money," said Cooling. The efforts of task force members uncovered a variety of funding sources through their respective agency programs.

After the disaster, a somewhat unconventional source of aid came from the Department of Corrections which provided inmate labor through the Community Work Project program. "I would encourage local emergency managers to use this resource," said Cooling. "They provided labor for general cleanup to both public and private property."

Her words of advice? "Make sure your Emergency Operations Plan addresses recovery as well as response issues and that it is hazard-specific to your community. Keep the whole process simple. Keep your forms simple, keep your plan simple and to the point and ensure the plan is something you can follow through with. Form a task force to carry through with hazard mitigation efforts during the recovery phase."

## New software speeds weather updates

For fast weather updates during a disaster, tune in to the VDES Emergency Operations Center. The Communications Branch has installed PC software that enables localities to get National Weather Service (NWS) information much faster than in the past.

Formerly, information received from the weather wire was retyped into the VEOC Virginia Criminal Information Network (VCIN) terminal, a process that ate up valuable time, particularly during widespread weather events.

"This software lets a standard PC act as a VCIN terminal," said VDES Communications Supervisor, Vic Buisset. "When we receive information over the NWS weather wire, we can now feed it directly to the PC, configure it for VCIN and send it out to local government. We've been able to increase the percentage of warnings we can put out within 10 minutes of receiving weather wire data."

For more information, call Vic Buisset at 804/674-2481.

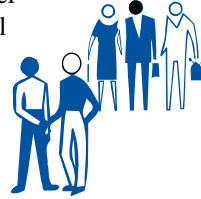
# Disaster recovery task force formed

## Task force first of its kind in nation

**A**ll too often, many disaster victims slip through the cracks of the system. They may not qualify for state or federal programs or, if they do, these programs may not be sufficient to meet their needs. Hurricane Fran's unfriendly visit and the extensive flooding that followed, affected thousands of people across the state. This incident helped inspire the formation of the State Disaster Recovery Task Force, an initiative that's the first of its type in the country.

Its goal is to assist individuals and families who have registered for available state and federal assistance, but who may still have unmet needs. The task force, managed by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development,

works in conjunction with voluntary organizations and other local, state and federal agencies, such as the Virginia Department of Social Services and FEMA.



To help people through the recovery process, the group provides assistance that may include housing repair, food, clothing and other needs.

A work in progress, the task force plans to operate through locally organized groups that will be the first tier in the process. Initially, these groups will meet to identify and review needs that may arise within their communities. During the

recovery process, if local resources are insufficient to meet these needs, requests will be referred to regional groups operating out of Social Services' field offices.

Membership in these regional task forces will be made up of representatives from state, federal and private-sector organizations with resources that most closely match the needs of the community as identified by the local groups.

The state task force is currently setting up a regional network and, as the program develops, the *Update* newsletter will keep you informed. For more information, call Task Force Coordinator Selby Jacobs at 804/213-3344 or 804/371-7070.

# Special needs committee brainstorms ideas

**V**irginia's close brush with Hurricane Felix last summer challenged the Tidewater region to reexamine disaster preparedness for its special needs population. To brainstorm solutions in this area, a special needs committee was formed last year by Newport News Emergency Services Coordinator Jack Williamson in a regional effort involving York County and the cities of Poquoson, Hampton and Newport News.

"With regard to special needs, there are a lot of issues," said Williamson. "One, there is no system nationwide that addresses the issue of providing care to the special needs population in general, and there needs to be one. Two, the medical community and the insurance industry need to be proactively involved."

When selecting committee members, Williamson worked

to involve local regional hospitals and home health care businesses. "The only way to solve the problem is to bring the whole health care community together," said Williamson. "They need to be part of the answer on issues related to special needs. They are the subject-matter experts."

Committee work has included:

- ◆ Efforts to identify transportation resources. The committee is seeking alternate ways, other than ambulances, to transport people with special needs to shelters or hospitals. Members are working with public transportation, the school system and local hospitals that have extra transportation resources. Within the next several months, the committee hopes to establish mutual aid agreements with these groups.

- ◆ The possibility of passing legislation that more clearly

defines the responsibilities of the medical community and home health care providers regarding the special needs population.

- ◆ Efforts to standardize terminology between the medical community, emergency services and other involved organizations.

An example of this is the concept of "triage" used in the medical community to determine the level of treatment needed. The committee is applying this concept in one of their major initiatives. To help people with special needs determine the level of care they need in the event of an emergency, the committee is developing a simple form.

"We want everyone to be able to use and understand this form — from the person with special needs to hospital staff and EMS workers," said Williamson. "Emergency services is taking the triage

concept and applying it to this self-evaluation process. This form is meant to get people with special needs to take the first step to provide for themselves during a disaster."

By going through a "checklist" of questions, the form will help people determine whether they can use a public shelter during a disaster or whether they need to make other arrangements with a medical provider or guardian.

"When this checklist is finalized, we will use a massive public information campaign to distribute this form to the public," said Williamson. He added, "We are still stressing that, ultimately, responsibility rests with the individual or their guardian to ensure that their needs will be provided for during a disaster when evacuation is required."

**(Next month: The efforts of other states.)**

# HAZ MAT



## Unknown substance released in restaurant

**S**eptember 23 was a normal day for the employees and customers of a fast-food restaurant in Blackstone — until about 9:30 that evening. At that time, local fire services responded to a call from the restaurant and arrived to find about 20 people who had fallen ill from exposure to an unidentified substance within the building.

They were taken to two nearby hospitals while fire officials sealed off the site and assessed the situation. Initially, a freon gas leak from a refrigeration unit was suspected of causing the illnesses.

VDES Hazardous Materials Officer Greg Britt was notified and provided technical guidance. Using the business's Material Safety Data Sheet, he contacted the manufacturer of the product and determined that the employees' symptoms were not consistent with those from freon gas exposure.

The Henrico Regional Hazmat Team was dispatched to the scene and made several Level A entries into the building to conduct extensive air monitoring. Meanwhile, hospital personnel were displaying symptoms similar to the patients. Staff suspected the presence of the substance in the patients' clothing.

Local law enforcement, fire services and the regional hazmat team finally determined the culprit to be pepper gas which was allegedly

released into the restaurant by some customers. The scenario could have been deadlier and highlights the need for emergency decon procedures when dealing with unknown substances.

"You definitely need to consider decon with this type of incident," said Britt. "When emergency responders run into unknown substances like this, they need to take precautions. We could have had some very serious problems if the hospital emergency room had been contaminated. First responders need to protect themselves as well as their patients and emergency room personnel. In an incident like this, when the substance is odorless and colorless, you don't know whether or not you're breathing it in."

What were the lessons learned from this event? To protect patients and hospital staff, decon procedures should be initiated. A facility's Material Safety Data Sheets must be reviewed to determine which products, if any, may be suspect. Local hospitals, in order to prepare, should be alerted that they will be treating patients who have been exposed to an unknown substance. Finally, first responders should take the necessary precautions to protect themselves, such as wearing personal protective equipment and respiratory masks.

## Database tracks disaster costs

**F**rom 1975 to 1994, the U.S. spent approximately one quarter of a billion dollars per week on meteorological natural disasters. During that time, some 6,000 people were killed and over 50,000 were injured because of these types of disasters.

An article in the September issue of *Natural Hazards Observer* reported preliminary data compiled by the Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center regarding natural disasters. The data concerns property and crop loss as well as death and injury statistics.

According to the article, the center has established a database containing information on over 30,000 disasters as part of an effort to more accurately assess the cost of natural disasters in this country.

Some hazards included in the database are droughts, dust storms, earthquakes, extreme cold, fires, floods, hurricanes, severe storms/hail, ice/sleet, snow/wind and tornadoes. To be included in the database, the event must have fulfilled at least one of three criteria: it must have caused at least \$50,000 or more in damage, it must have caused at least one death and, if the event was an earthquake, it must have

registered at least IV on the Modified Mercalli scale.

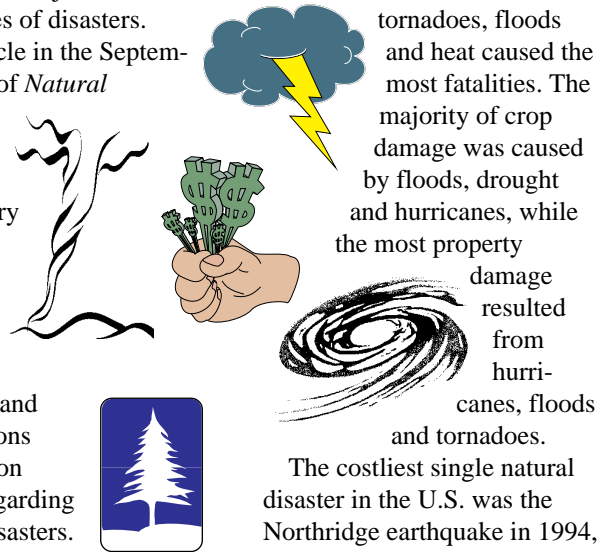
Some of the center's preliminary statistics show that during the last 20 years, earthquakes and hurricanes were the most expensive

disasters, while tornadoes, floods and heat caused the most fatalities. The majority of crop damage was caused by floods, drought and hurricanes, while the most property damage resulted from hurricanes, floods and tornadoes.

The costliest single natural disaster in the U.S. was the Northridge earthquake in 1994, with estimated losses topping \$25 billion. In 1992, Hurricane Andrew cost the country \$20 billion and, in 1989, Hurricane Hugo \$6 billion.

During this 20-year period, insured property losses amounted to \$72 billion. The Northridge earthquake and Hurricanes Andrew and Hugo were the three costliest presidentially-declared disasters between 1989 and 1994, with FEMA paying out a combined total of about \$13 billion in disaster assistance.

The article pointed out that, for this data to be effective, it needs to be integrated with national databases that deal with likely future events and mitigation practices. For more information or to contribute data, call Betsy Forrest at 303/492-1028, e-mail [betsy.forrest@colorado.edu](mailto:betsy.forrest@colorado.edu).



## TRAINING



### Overview of Incident Command System

December 17  
Culpeper

### Basic Public Information/Media Relations Workshop

January 9, 1997

Culpeper

For information, call the VDES Training Office at 804/674-2458

### Technological Hazards Division

### Chemistry of Hazardous Materials

December 2-13

Ashland

For information, call the VDES Tech Haz Division at 804/674-2510

### Search and Rescue

### GSAR Institute, Parts I and II

January 17-19, 1997

February 14-16, 1997

Camp VA Jaycee

For information, call Winnie Pennington at 804/674-2422

### Conferences and Workshops

### CAMEO Training Workshop

December 10-12

Richmond

For information, call George Roarty at 804/674-2708

### VEMA Annual Conference

March 5-7, 1997

Virginia Beach

For information, call 540/582-7095

### National Association for Search and Rescue Conference

"Response '97"

May 28-31, 1997

Richmond

For information, call 804/674-2422

## SAR offers management skills class

If you are an experienced search and rescue practitioner or an emergency services coordinator interested in learning advanced SAR management skills, "Managing Search Operations" is for you. This two-part course covers state-of-the-art SAR management theory and practice. Both sessions start next year with part one scheduled for February 22-23 and part two for March 10-12 in Charlottesville. For information, call Winnie Pennington at 804/674-2422.

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## Ohio's outreach program reaches out to Girl Scouts

Sometimes public outreach can be ingeniously simple. In Mahoning County, Ohio, the Emergency Management Office partnered with the County Commissioners and brought disaster preparedness education to the community.

The local emergency manager and the area Girl Scouts Council fashioned "Emergency Preparedness, the First 72 Hours" as a preschool program and merit badge and patch for the local scout council. It was a smash with the kids, who must

complete tasks such as assembling a disaster supplies kit to earn the badge. Because the council encompasses a four-county area, the audience includes 10,000 scouts and their families.

For information, call Walter M. Duzzny, emergency management director, at 330/740-2200. If you would like a copy of the program kit, call Dottie Robinson, program supervisor for the local scout council, at 330/652-5877.

## VDES brochure redesigned

Update your publication stockpile with the new VDES agency brochure. Freshly redesigned, the brochure explains the VDES mission in the context of preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation.

To foster a better understanding of the role VDES plays in assisting local

government with disasters, you may want to distribute the brochure to your Board of Supervisors, county and city employees, law enforcement, EMS and fire and rescue services. If you have not yet received your copies or would like to place an order, call 804/674-2499.



The main office of the Virginia Department of Fire Programs moved to downtown Richmond in mid-October. Their new address and phone numbers are:

**James Monroe Building,  
101 North 14th Street,  
18th Floor,  
Richmond, VA 23219  
Phone: 804/371-0220  
Fax: 804/371-0219**



310 Turner Road  
Richmond, VA 23225-6491

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UPDATE is a monthly publication of the Virginia Department of Emergency Services. Contributions of articles or ideas are welcome and can be made by calling 804/674-2499.

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Access the VDES homepage at:  
<http://www.state.va.us/~des/des.htm>

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